



NUI MAYNOOTH  
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

## **Introductory Module**

### **Unit 2: Study Skills for Adults Returning to Learning**

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## Unit 2: Aim and Outcomes

### Aim:

The broad aim of this Introductory Module is to help you to approach the study aspects of this course with confidence and to introduce you to learning strategies that can enhance your capacity to learn. It will look at some of the issues raised when returning to learning having spent some time out of the education system.

### Outcomes:

#### On completion of this unit students will have:

- Reflected on the challenges associated with returning to learning
- Raised their awareness concerning the unique nature of adult learning
- Reflected on the key aspects of effective learning
- Developed a method of reading, writing, and using their time for learning.

*The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn, how to adapt to change, the person who realises that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.*

(Adapted from Carl Rogers)

## Challenges of Returning to Learning:

[Apps \(1981\)](#) notes three main difficulties associated with returning to learning that cause particular problems for adults; these are:

### Lack of Confidence

At one level this involves the nervousness people face when meeting new people in an educational setting and the fantasy that every other person in the group is more “intelligent” than they are. At another level it involves lack of confidence in one’s capacity to complete essays and assignments having spent so long out of the educational system. However, at the deepest level this lack of confidence often manifests itself as a feeling of not belonging, or of being out of place, in a university setting.

### Negative Experiences of School

This lack of confidence very often has its origins in the fact that many people’s perceptions of learning are based largely on negative experiences of school and they fearfully anticipate a disempowering repeat of these experiences.

### Other Commitments

Other Commitments can occupy a huge amount of attention, time and energy. Adults returning to learning are usually quite concerned that they will not be able to find time for everything and everyone. Very often they either over- or under-estimate the amount of time that they should devote to study and don’t recognise the fact that they already have many of the organisational skills that are central to effective participation in third level education.

Recognising these difficulties is the first step in being able to take responsibility for them and they will lessen as you become more familiar with the learning process.

## Characteristics of the Adult Learner:

[Malcolm Knowles \(1984\)](#) did some seminal work on the nature of adult learning. He identifies several characteristics of adult learning and recognising these seems to play an important part in effective learning.

**The three main characteristics can be summarised as follows:**

- A.** Adults are **motivated** to learn as they experience needs and interests which learning will satisfy
- B.** Adults' orientation to learning is life-centred, involving a tendency to **apply learning immediately** in terms of life-situations rather than postponing the application of learning
- C.** **Experience** is the richest resource for adults' learning

**A.**

### **Motivation**

[Robinson \(1979\)](#) says that "*purposeful learning occurs when individuals experience a problem or recognise a gap between where they are and where they want to be*". This gap is often what motivates people to return to learning and to be aware of one's own motivation is an important aspect of effective learning

Now please take some time to conduct your first [Self Learning Task](#)

## [Self Learning Task No.1](#)

**Take some time to reflect on your own reasons for doing the course. Your motivation is what will carry you through the inevitable bad times. Like any undertaking that will stretch your resources, there will be times of stress, tension and frustration as well as times of insight and understanding. Inevitably you will encounter times when you wonder if it would be easier for you to give up the course and return to a nice cosy life! It is exactly at these times that it is essential to recall your deepest held reasons for doing the course. You may want to use your [learning journal](#) to write about this and to reflect on your motivation.**

### **B. Immediate use**

Learning in adulthood is oriented towards the problems of life and towards immediacy of application in resolving those problems. [Robinson \(1979\)](#) says that: "*belief that a learning experience will help an adult cope with problems becomes a powerful motivator for participation in adult education*".

In your life you are faced on a daily basis with challenges and issues which you will struggle with on a course such as this. These challenges will provide you with an opportunity to test out the skills, ideas and insights you will encounter on the course.

Now please take some time to conduct [Self Learning Task No. 2](#)

## Self Learning Task No.2

**What are the skill gaps you experience? What issues do you face regularly in your work that you find difficult to deal with? Far from being an obstacle to your learning, these issues will become the very vehicle of your learning.**

### C. Experience

Thirdly, and related to both of the above, is the fact that your richest resource on the course will be your own experiences, your experience of your own growth and development and your experience of facilitating development in your clients.

Many people have painful memories of doing homework, essays and assignments that were concerned only with theoretical and factual material. In contrast to this, this course is very much concerned with your own experiences and your capacity to reflect on these experiences in the light of the theoretical material. In this way, you are already an expert and you simply need to be open enough to be able to build on the resources you already have

### Confidence

Each of these three aspects of adult learning is closely related to the issue of confidence. For many people returning to learning is in itself a confident thing to do, but it is invariably tinged with fear, the fear of the unknown and the fear of failure. This is a natural and inevitable part of the learning process. As many commentators point out, experiences of fear and anxiety are to be expected and, indeed, to be welcomed. Very little learning would take place if each and every student was completely confident of his or her own capacities - they would not be motivated to develop new capacities within themselves.

So it is true to say that effective learners are not always necessarily confident learners. They are, however, usually willing to do something about their lack of confidence. Rather than succumb to the anxiety of the blank page, effective learners will begin somewhere, get something done and thereby lessen their fear.

This, then, begs the question - what are the characteristics of an effective learner and of effective learning? This question will be answered in the sections to follow.

Now please take some time to conduct [Self Learning Task No. 3](#)

## Self Learning Task No.3

**Stop and reflect on how confident you really feel. Now write three ways in which you will build your own confidence for this course.**

## Characteristics of Effective Learning

There are as many characteristics of effective learning as there are effective learners. However, what follows are some guidelines suggested by commentators in the area.

### Effective Learning is a Matter of Skills and Strategies that can be Learned

Many of us inherit a view of effective learning as being dependent on having a high IQ. This idea is fed by many of society's methods of job selection, the education system and so on. However, experiences with adult learners have shown that, far from being the case, effective learning is not dependent on IQ. It is much more dependent on motivation. That is the drive that a student has to learn, grow and develop. Once the motivation is there, developing your capacity to be an effective learner is a matter of developing strategies and skills. [Guy Claxton,\(1990\)](#) an eminent educational psychologist, puts it as follows:

*'ability' or 'intelligence', far from being some innate, monolithic general-purpose quality given out in differing amounts, is in large measure, an amalgam of learning strategies (p.10).*

### There is no One Method of Effective Learning

It is important to recognise that there is no one effective way of learning. In their valuable little book [Marshall and Rowland \(1983\)](#) tell us:

*There is no one way of learning and studying that suits everyone. And because you change daily, weekly and monthly, there's no one way of studying which always suits you. So you need to get to know who you are and how you live (p.1).*

So according to this view you need to be aware of your own preferred way of learning, your own energy and your own needs for independence and support.

### Effective Learning Always Involves Tolerance of a Certain Amount of Frustration

Effective learning always involves a capacity to tolerate a certain amount of frustration. [Guy Claxton \(1990\)](#) refers to this as “emotional resilience”, which he says is:

*the ability to tolerate making some mistakes, feeling in a mental fog, not having a firm grasp on what is going on and being somewhat anxious and frustrated (p.153).*

The traditional approach to learning depends on a student's capacity to learn by rote and to manipulate information in a way that satisfies examiners. Whereas, all learning will involve a certain amount of this, truly effective and significant learning is a creative process and, therefore, depends on your capacity to struggle with the ideas, concepts, and information in a creative way. This in itself will make the learning process much more rewarding and enjoyable.

### Effective Learning Always Demands a Certain Level of Openness

Effective learning, as we implied above, demands a certain level of openness on the learner's part. [Claxton \(1990\)](#) says, “learning always involves a modification of what you already believe or know” (p: 6). As we have seen above, this in effect means that

your own experiences are a resource for your learning. It also means that, to be an effective learner you need to enter into a process of looking at your own set ways of thinking about things, of looking at the world, even your tried and trusted way of doing your job. You will need to be able to drop or suspend your own assumptions and this is never an easy process. In other words, significant learning requires openness to looking in a non-defensive way at the fundamental aspects of life and work, and to be able to view new ways of looking at things more as a challenge than as a threat. ([Claxton \(1990\)](#) p.153)

Procrastination is the single most common reaction to study problems. [Caroline Brem \(1996\)](#) humorously refers to this issue in her chapter on 'Identifying Personal Blockages' she writes:

*Instead of sitting down and writing this chapter I have, this morning, made three phone calls, looked for a book someone asked me about, gone out twice to check the mailbox and done several household chores which other members of my household could have done. That is procrastination. Oh yes, I also read almost all the P-words in my dictionary. (p.58).*

So, it is almost inevitable that at some stage you will cope with your study workload by procrastination. Given that it is inevitable, it is probably a healthy part of the creative process. However, as [Barnes \(1992\)](#) says, the effective learner is one who gets started and reduces the stress of study simply by starting!

### **Having and Being**

In conclusion, then, we can say that the approach and view of effective learning already outlined can be summarised using a distinction which [Erich Fromm \(1979\)](#) developed. Fromm distinguishes between a “**having**” approach to learning and a “**being**” approach to learning.

He says that students in the "**having**" mode will:

*Listen to a lecture, hearing the words and understanding their logical structure and their meaning and, as best they can, will write down every word so that, later on they can memorise their notes and thus pass an examination. But the content does not become part of their own individual system of thought, enriching and widening it. (p.37)*

On the other hand, according to Fromm, students in the “**being**” mode of learning respond differently:

*...instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, they listen, they hear, and most important, they receive and respond in an active, productive way. What they listen to stimulates their own thinking processes. They do not simply acquire knowledge that they can take home and memorise. Each student has been affected and has changed (p.38)*

In many ways, the distinction between the two types of learning informs the kind of learning which is promoted on a course such as this. The “**being**” mode of learning, with its emphasis on an active, receptive and critical approach to learning, is most



appropriate to the kind of personal and professional development that the course will attempt to facilitate.

With reference to this module, it would seem that very often the notion of “study skills” can involve connotations of a “bag of tricks” which will help you to “get” knowledge and to fulfil academic requirements. Whereas this is to some extent true of all university courses, we are more concerned on this course with the ways in which you digest the skills and theories you encounter, allowing them to become a part of how you do your work. Therefore we are concerned here with “learning strategies” which will help you to do some of the following:

- Encounter new theories, to understand them in the context of your work.
- Research information about areas of knowledge that are unfamiliar to you.
- Formulate critical opinions of issues relevant to your work.

The section to follow considers a range of learning strategies that can help you to do this.

## Learning Strategies

As noted earlier, one of the critical differences between school-based learning and adult learning is the number of work, family and other commitments that adults have to balance with their study commitments. This is about “finding a rhythm for learning”. Finding this balance will depend on several factors, for example:

- **Availability of Time and Space**
- **Being Organised**
- **Knowing Your Own Rhythms of Rest and Activity**
- **Tuning into Yourself**

### Availability of Time and Space

One of the barriers to effective learning is that people can become overwhelmed by the amount of activity they have to engage in and the number of responsibilities they have in their lives. It is useful to look closely at the amount of this activity that is productive and creative.

Now please take some time to conduct [Self Learning Task No. 4](#)

### Self Learning Task No.4

**Take some time to imagine a typical day in your work life from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. Break the total number of hours spent awake into blocks of time spent doing the following:**

- **Time spent working**
- **Time spent commuting**
- **Time spent with family**
- **Time spent doing domestic work**
- **Time spent relaxing**

**Having thought in detail about your daily round of activity you will have a clearer idea of the amount of time available for study. Construct for yourself a realistic weekly timetable that allocates adequate time to all of your commitments. Remember also that your [study group](#) will be a valuable support for you throughout the course and that you should allocate adequate time to meeting and talking with your peers.**

### Being Organised

As well as being organised in your approach to allocating time for study, you will use your time more productively if you have an organised and focused approach to each study period. Each study period should involve some or all of the following activities

- Taking time to review what you have already studied
- Concentrated study involving note-taking and writing
- Taking time to reflect on the impact what you are studying is having on you
- Planning ahead for your next study period

### **Knowing Your Own Rhythms of Rest and Activity.**

Whereas it is an important aspect of effective learning to be disciplined about your approach and your timetable, it is also important to be flexible. Flexibility is a well-recognised aspect of creativity and it will therefore enhance your work greatly. For example, some weeks you will have more energy than others and you will therefore find it easier to concentrate. If you consistently force yourself to concentrate when you are tired, you will soon become exhausted and disinterested.

So, paying attention to your own rhythms of rest and activity, your own fluctuations in mental and physical energy and how they relate to commitments and deadlines is essential to effective learning.

### **Tuning into Yourself**

When engaged in a new and demanding activity such as study, people can often react to stress by demanding more of themselves. Sometimes, of course, this is necessary and appropriate and can lead to high quality productive and creative work. However, constant stress without the balance of rest and relaxation is damaging and will inevitably impair your capacity to learn on the course. So, it follows that a key skill in learning effectively is to be able to balance the pressures of study with looking after your own needs for rest. This skill will only come with awareness. For this reason developing your capacity to tune into yourself is a key strategy in developing your capacity to learn.

Now please take some time to conduct [Self Learning Task No. 5](#)

### **Self Learning Task No.5**

**Explore ways in which you can be more effective at tuning into yourself. Talk with others and make a list of the different ways. Pick the three that you think will best suit you.**

## Study Skills

In this section we will look at key study skills. Firstly we will look at **good study habits** and then we will consider dangerous **study traps**.

### Good Study Habits

**The following habits are central to improving your study skills**

1. Decide what to study (reasonable task) and how long or how many (chapters, pages, problems, etc.). Set and stick to deadlines.
2. Do difficult tasks first. To avoid procrastination, start off with an interesting aspect of the project.
3. Have special places to study. Take into consideration lighting, temperature, and availability of materials.
4. Study 50 minutes, and then take a 10 minute break. Stretch, relax, have an energy snack.
5. Allow longer, "massed" time periods for organising relationships and concepts, outlining and writing papers. Use shorter, "spaced" time intervals for rote memorisation, review, and self-testing. Use odd moments for recall / review.
6. If you get tired or bored, switch task / activity, subject or environment. Stop studying when you are no longer being productive.
7. Do rote memory tasks and review, especially details, just before you fall asleep.
8. Study with a friend. Quiz each other, compare notes and predict test questions.

### Study Traps

	<b>Dilemma</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>1.</b>	"I Don't Know Where To Begin"	Take Control. Make a list of all the things you have to do. Break your workload down into manageable chunks. Prioritise! Schedule your time realistically.
<b>2</b>	"I've Got So Much To Study . . . And So Little Time"	Preview. Survey your syllabus, reading material, and notes. Identify the most important topics emphasised, and areas still not understood. Organise and focus in on the main topics. Adapt this method to your own style and study material.
<b>3</b>	"This Stuff Is So Dry, I Can't Even Stay Awake Reading It"	Get actively involved with the text as you read. Ask yourself, "What is important to remember about this section?" Take notes or underline key concepts. Discuss the material with others in your class. Study together. Stay on the offensive, especially with material that you don't find interesting, rather than reading passively and missing important points.
<b>4</b>	"I Read It. I Understand It. But I Just Can't Get It To Sink In"	Elaborate. We remember best the things that are most meaningful to us. As you are reading, try to elaborate upon new information with your own examples. Try

		to integrate what you're studying with what you already know. You will be able to better remember new material if you can link it to something that's already meaningful to you.
5	"I Think I Understand It"	Test yourself. Make up questions about key sections in notes or reading. Keep in mind what the lecturer has stressed in the course. Examine the relationships between concepts and sections. Often, simply by changing section headings you can generate many effective questions.
6	"There's Too Much To Remember"	Organise. Information is recalled well if it is represented in an organised framework that will make retrieval more systematic. There are many techniques that can help you organise new information, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write chapter outlines or summaries; emphasise relationships between sections.</li> <li>• Group information into categories or hierarchies, where possible.</li> <li>• Information Mapping. Draw up a matrix to organise and interrelate material</li> </ul>
7	"I Knew It A Minute Ago"	Review. After reading a section, try to recall the information contained in it. Try answering the questions you made up for that section. If you cannot recall enough, re-read portions you had trouble remembering. The more time you spend studying, the more you tend to recall. Even after the point where information can be perfectly recalled, further study makes the material less likely to be forgotten entirely. In other words, you can't over-study. However, how you organise and integrate new information is still more important than how much time you spend studying.
8	"I'm Gonna Stay Up All Night Until I Get This"	Avoid Mental Exhaustion. Take short breaks often when studying. When you take a study break, and just before you go to sleep at night, don't think about study. Relax and unwind, mentally and physically.

## Learning Skills

Once you have decided [what to study](#) you are now ready to gather information and communicate your learnings and ideas. The sections to follow deal with the learning skills you will need for this endeavour, namely:

- **Reading**
- **Note taking**
- **Writing and Communication.**

### Reading

How you go about reading will depend on several factors, including your own personal style, the purpose for which you are reading and so on. The following reading guidelines will be helpful:

<b>Guideline</b>	<b>Guideline Expanded</b>
<b>Don't read everything, choose carefully and clearly</b>	If you know why you are reading something it will be more meaningful.
<b>Read less - understand more</b>	Be careful not to skim a book and assume that it has "gone in". Ask yourself at regular intervals if you have understood the author's argument and how it relates to your task. If you regularly find that you are reading page after page but have no recollection of having done so - take a break and return to it later.
<b>If you're not taking notes - you're not studying</b>	This isn't always the case, but it is a useful rule of thumb. Writing and note-taking are important not simply because you will have a record of your reading which you can consult later, but it is also a vital aspect of meaningful reading.
<b>Always pay attention to the impact something is having on you:</b>	The opposite of rote learning is meaningful learning and the latter is far more effective. You can enhance your learning by developing the habit of standing back and checking out how you react to your reading in the light of your own experiences.

There are various methods of note taking recommended by study skills texts; you can consult the [bibliography](#) for this unit as a guide. You can also refer to [mind-maps](#) discussed in the final section of this unit.

### The Reading Process Incorporates Four Separate Tasks:

#### 1. Scan

The first task is to scan the material to be read. Look at the title, the author and the table of contents. Quickly scan the introduction and the conclusion and look at the index. Decide if this material is important and if so how important it is in the context of the learning you are undertaking. Put it into a priority order:

- Read now
- Read later
- Reference
- Option to read
- Not relevant

## 2. Scope

Having scanned and decided what you are going to read and why (scope), set aside a time and a place. Have good light and conditions. Have a highlighter and a notebook. It is important in this stage to take comprehensive notes on the text, in particular recording any quotations which one might find useful. Set a timer so that you read for learning according to good learning habits.

## 3. Recall

At this stage, after you have read the relevant sections you want to check what you have learned. Take time to jot down what you remember from your reading. Try to recall all the relevant points from your reading. Later you can take the recall process further by beginning to make links with other material you have read previously, comparing and contrasting information and ideas. Also, start evaluating the difference your reading makes to your own view of things. In this way you are integrating and personalising your learning and improving your memory and recall.

## 4. Review

This is a particularly important part of the learning process which, nevertheless, it might be easy to neglect. This stage simply consists of reviewing the work you have done in a given study period, putting your notes together in order and making preliminary decisions about what the next stage is in your study. Your study periods will be far more productive if you have a sense of continuity between them.

It will also be helpful at this stage to write down any random thoughts, feelings and reactions you have in a reflective or [learning journal](#). Many important insights may arise at this time when you are thinking less about your topic and paying more attention to your own process.

## What is a Learning Journal?

**Your Learning Journal is much like a personal diary. You use it to keep a record of your thoughts and ideas as you engage in [Reflective Learning Activities](#) and [Portfolio Learning Activities](#) over the course of your studies. Your Personal Learning Journal is a record of your learning experiences and thus forms the basis of your [Summary Learning Statements](#) (1500 words) handed in at the end of each year culminating in your attendance at [Summative Interview](#) on completion of the course at the end of Year 2.**

## Note Taking

### The Cornell System

The Cornell system for taking notes is designed to save time but yet be highly efficient. There is no rewriting or retyping of your notes. It is a "do it right in the first place" system comprising three steps which may be best described as:

1. **Preparation**
2. **Process**
3. **Postscript**

#### Step One: Preparation

**Before the class/lecture** take a large, loose-leaf notebook. Use only one side of the paper. (you then can lay your notes out to see the direction of a lecture.). Draw a vertical line 2 1/2 inches from the left side of your paper. This is the recall column. Notes will be taken to the right of this margin. Later, key words or phrases can be written in the recall column.

#### Step Two: Process

**During the class/lecture** record your notes in paragraph form. Capture general ideas, not illustrative ideas. Skip lines to show end of ideas or thoughts. Using abbreviations will save time. Write legibly.

#### Step Three: Postscript

**After the class/lecture** read through your notes and make them more legible if necessary. Now "reduce" your notes using colours. Jot down ideas or key words which give you the idea of the class/lecture as you re-read the lecturer's ideas and add in reflections in your own words. Now cover up the right-hand portion of your notes and recall the general ideas and concepts of the class/lecture in the recall column. Overlap your notes showing only recall columns and you have your review.

#### Editing lecture notes

There are several good reasons for organising and reviewing your notes as soon as possible after the class/lecture:

- While the lecture is still fresh in your mind, you can fill in from memory examples and facts that you did not have time to write down during the lecture. Moreover, you can recall what parts of the lecture were unclear to you so that you can consult the lecturer, the graduate assistant, a classmate, your text, or additional readings for further information.
- Immediately reviewing notes promotes better retention than review after a longer period of time. Unless students review notes within 24 hours after the lecture or at least before the next lecture, their retention will drop and they will be relearning rather than reviewing.

**A method of annotation is usually preferable to recopying notes. The following suggestions for annotating may be helpful:**

- Underline key statements or important concepts.
- Use asterisks or other signal marks to indicate importance.



- Use margins or blank pages for coordinating notes with the text. Perhaps indicate relevant pages of the text beside the corresponding information in the notes.
- Use a key and a summary.
- Use one of the margins to keep a key to important names, formulas, dates, concepts, and the like. This forces you to anticipate questions of an objective nature and provides specific facts that you need to develop essays. Use the other margin to write a short summary of the topics on the page, relating the contents of the page to the whole lecture or to the lecture of the day before. Condensing the notes in this way not only helps you to learn them but also prepares you for the kind of thinking required for essays, assignments and exams.

## Writing and Communication

Perhaps more than any other activity in third level education, writing causes people the greatest anxiety. This anxiety arises despite the fact that many people communicate effectively on a daily basis through their writing skills.

This anxiety is well founded in many ways. Writing can be an exciting and absorbing activity, particularly when you are able to articulate complex ideas to your own satisfaction. But, as many writers testify, it is always a demanding activity and one that needs constant practice. The exercises presented here will provide you with the basis for developing and practicing your writing skills.

### Free writing

It is usual that adults returning to learning feel a degree of fear when faced with their first written assignment and this fear very often stifles creativity. Many students find that the technique of free writing is an invaluable one which, when developed and used consistently, can help them to become unstuck when writing assignments. The technique of free writing is designed to help overcome our tendency to want to get it perfectly right first time, our wish to be able to write perfect sentences without revising. Simply put, free writing helps to bypass the automatic and in-built critic that leads to the common phenomenon of writer's block.

In a very useful chapter on "Developing Your Own Writing Voice" [Marshall and Rowland \(1983\)](#) say of free writing:

*When you are free to write without a plan and without editing as you write, the process of writing is the stimulus that helps you discover the focus and approach of what you want to say and how you want to say it. Free writing can help bring out ideas that are lying dormant or jumbled in your head and give them coherence. This method is particularly valuable if you freeze up when you have to write or if you have a mental block when writing an assignment (pp 133-134).*

### Clear Communication

However, although free writing is an extremely useful tool to release creativity, you will need to learn to organise your writing if you are to communicate effectively. This is, in fact, one of the essential features of assignment writing that students often lose in their anxiety to impress their tutors - effective writing is essentially about clear communication.

Marshall and Rowland present us with several rules for clear communication, which are a useful checklist for you in completing your assignments. To communicate effectively:

- Have clear in your mind something you think is worth saying
- Keep in mind your purpose for saying it
- Be aware of the person/people/audience with whom you are communicating
- Take care to say exactly what you want to say
- Say it simply and succinctly

[\(Marshall and Rowland, 1983 p. 144\)](#)

## Organising, Planning and Writing Essays

### Organising your writing

Having developed your capacity to tap into the flow of ideas on a topic, it is important to learn to organise your writing. When you are presented with a topic for an assignment, the following four steps may prove helpful:

1. Take time to look carefully at your topic. Use a free writing or other [Mindmap](#)/Brainstorming technique to establish what you already know about the subject. Make a list of any notes, articles, books or other sources of information on the topic. Do not underestimate what you already know!
2. Begin to [research](#) your topic. How you go about this will depend on the nature of the assignment.
3. Depending on how much time you have to complete your assignment, choose the appropriate material and attempt to understand the argument presented as best you can. Remember to take detailed notes.
4. Having researched the topic brainstorm again on the topic, developing a [mind-map](#) of all of the information and ideas available to you (For a particularly effective method of doing this see [Tony Buzan \(1989\)](#)). Try to group the ideas together under various headings. You are then in a position to develop a plan for your assignment.

### Planning and Writing Essays

Many people have negative memories of being asked to write outlines of essays in school. One particular adult student recalled being required to produce a 'plan' for each essay he wrote, something which he could not do until the essay was finished. So, despite the fact that all of his "outlines" were written somewhat retrospectively, he still achieved good grades!

Whereas planning your essay is an important part of clear and effective communication, it is also important to recognise that different people use different approaches to their written work to equal effect.

**Whichever approach you take to planning an outline for your work, any essay should contain the following four elements:**

#### 1. Introduction

Just as there are various ways to plan an outline, there are also various ways to introduce an essay effectively (see for example chapter 6 of [Barnes 1992](#)). However, the introduction needs to set the scene for the essay by making a statement of intent. In the introduction say what are you going to say, how are you going to say it and what the reader should gain from reading this essay. In other words, simply state, in an engaging manner, what you hope to deal with in your essay.

#### 2. Body of the Essay

The body of the essay will do some or all of the following: develop point by point the argument you wish to make to address the topic you have been given, refer constantly to research and ideas which you have read about and which are relevant, and, use quotations to illustrate points you are making

### **3. Conclusion**

Your conclusion should arrive at some kind of summary of the argument presented, providing a balanced conclusion to your treatment of the topic.

### **4. Bibliography**

Your essay should include a Bibliography ([see, for example, this unit's bibliography](#)), which is a comprehensive list of all of the material, articles and books, which you have consulted, referred to and quoted. You provide this as support to your essay. You should refer to methods of [referencing and bibliographical layout](#) from your Course Guide Handbook.

## Mind Maps

The human brain is very different from a computer. Whereas a computer works in a linear fashion, the brain works associatively as well as linearly - comparing, integrating and synthesizing as it goes. Association plays a dominant role in nearly every mental function, and words themselves are no exception. Every single word and idea has numerous links attaching it to other ideas and concepts.

Mind Maps™, developed by [Tony Buzan](#) are an effective method of note-taking and useful for the generation of ideas by associations. To make a mind map, one starts in the centre of the page with the main idea, and works outward in all directions, producing a growing and organised structure composed of key words and key images. Key features are:

- Organisation
- Key Words
- Association
- Clustering
- Visual Memory - Print the key words, use colour, symbols, icons, 3D-effects, arrows and outlining groups of words
- Outstandingness - every Mind Map needs a unique centre
- Conscious involvement

Mind Maps begin to take on the same structure as memory itself. Once a Mind Map is drawn, it seldom needs to be referred to again. Mind Maps help organize information.

Because of the large amount of association involved, they can be very creative, tending to generate new ideas and associations that have not been thought of before. Every item in a map is in effect, a centre of another map.

The creative potential of a mind map is useful in brainstorming sessions. You only need to start with the basic problem as the centre, and generate associations and ideas from it in order to arrive at a large number of different possible approaches. By presenting your thoughts and perceptions in a spatial manner and by using colour and pictures, a better overview is gained and new connections can be made visible.

## Conclusion

This unit has set out some learning strategies that will help you to negotiate your way throughout this course. However, reading a unit such as this will not develop those skills for you. Essentially the only way in which you will learn skills and develop strategies is by practicing them. So, we recommend that you consult this unit and some of the texts in the [Bibliography](#) at various times throughout your course of study, particularly at times when you are experiencing difficulties of any kind. Any of the texts in the bibliography will be useful to you on an on-going basis throughout your study.

## Bibliography

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